WHAT IS "COMMODITY FETISHISM"? A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE FOURTH SECTION OF THE FIRST CHAPTER OF MARX'S CAPITAL

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Abstract
This article offers a detailed comment on the fourth section of the first chapter of Marx's Capital, in order to determine and specify what exactly is the so-called "commodity fetishism". It is shown that in that section Marx is not dealing mainly with the misunderstanding of the commodity–form nor with the "reification" of social relations inherent of that form. Instead, the article claims that, for Marx, fetishism is a form of consciousness —arousing from the private character of labour— that mediates the very constitution of the commodity as such. In this sense, it is argued that value is not simply a form of social relation but, more precisely, an exteriorized and objectified form of consciousness through which the commodity producers organise social production.

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to determine clearly, through a detailed textual discussion, the precise meaning for Marx of what has been known as "commodity fetishism", at least in the Spanish and English-speaking traditions[1]. Despite the apparent simplicity of this task, several issues obscure the matter. To begin with, as Ehrbar (2010: 426) has pointed out, this widespread expression has no equivalent in the German text of the second edition of Capital, the last published during Marx's lifetime. In fact, Marx uses two different terms, instead of just one: "fetishistic character" (Fetischcharakter), and "fetishism" (Fetischismus), of which only the former has the commodity as an explicit and immediate referent (i.e. "fetishistic character of the commodity"). The second term, on the other hand, appears either only indirectly linked to the commodity, as something that "adheres" (ankleben) to the products of labor (Marx 1873a: 89); or as an attribute of economic thought (Ibid.: 100, 101). This complexity of Marx's treatment of fetishism has gone relatively unnoticed until Ehrbar's remark, which gave rise to subsequent inquiries into this distinction (Shultz 2012; Arthur 2013: 117 et seq.; Bellofiore 2014: 176 et seq.).

However, the problem is not limited to clarifying the terminological imprecision. In reality, it itself seems to be the result of a simplification of the problematic originally posed by Marx. In fact, Rubin already pointed out that the most common interpretation in his time – the beginning of the twentieth century – reduced the "fetishism of the commodity" to the problem of "false consciousness"; this, in turn, is understood as an erroneous understanding of the reality of capitalist social relations (1928: 53–54). For the criticized interpretation, in other words, fetishism consists in conceiving of relationships between people as if they were relationships between things[2]. In contrast, Rubin argued that the reification of social relations in capitalism is a real process, and not just a mystification[3]. However, Rubin does not completely dismiss the conception that he himself criticizes: in several parts of his book he also refers to fetishism as a simple illusion or false consciousness[4], oscillating between the conception of

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[1] In English, the most common expressions, equivalent to the Spanish one mentioned in the text, are "fetishism of commodities" and "commodity fetishism" (Schulz 2012:26).

[2] An example of this conception is the definition of the philosophical dictionary of the USSR: "Commodity fetishism: Distorted, false and illusory representation of man about things, commodities and relations of production (...) In men there arises the illusory idea that the things themselves, commodities, by their very nature, possess certain mysterious properties, which they do not really possess" (Rozental and Ludin 1939: 172). See also Kautsky (1886: 25-26). Contemporaneously, this is the interpretation of fetishism predominant in Analytic Marxism (Cohen 1978: 128; Elster 1985: 95-99).

[3] "[we can observe] in the economic sphere of the commodity-capitalist economy, the realization of the relations of production between people through things, their 'fusion' (the fetishism of the commodity, in the precise sense of the words)" (Rubin 1928: 339).

[4] "Vulgar economists (...) They consider the social characteristics of things (value, money, capital, etc.) as natural characteristics that belong to the things themselves. (…) This is the cause of the fetishism of the commodity that characterizes vulgar economists and of the

fetishism as a real feature of the relations of production and as an illusory form of consciousness. Consequently, in his conclusions, he merely states that "fetishism is not only a phenomenon of social consciousness, but of social being" (Rubin 1928: 108, emphasis added) without explaining anywhere how fetishism can be both at the same time and, indeed, without acknowledging the ambiguity of its interpretation.

As Schulz (2012:30) has recently highlighted, much of the subsequent discussion on commodity fetishism revolved around this duality, but without being able to resolve it or give it cause. For example, Geras, in his influential article of the early seventies, clearly identifies that the "phenomenon of fetishism" has two "aspects": a "real" one, which he calls "domination", and another related to consciousness, which he calls "mystification". But Geras does not delve into the question of the link between the two either, limiting himself to highlighting the true, but trivial, fact that "men are not in a position to control (...) social relations that they do not understand correctly" (1971: 72). Perhaps the most consistent position in this regard is Ehrbar's proposal to distinguish terminologically between "fetishistic character" and "fetishism", reserving the former term to refer to the "real" social relation and the latter to forms of consciousness. In this way, the ambiguity of the dualistic conception originated in Rubin is circumvented. But, in this way, what is only implicit in Rubin is simply made explicit and consolidated, namely, the conceptual separation between the "reification" of social relations and the form of consciousness of the individuals involved in such relations. The problem is that conceptual consistency is achieved, in Ehrbar's case, at the cost of losing sight of any "internal connection" between the two aspects, even going so far as to consider "fetishism" merely as a functional phenomenon for the maintenance of the "fetishistic character", but in no way necessary, insofar as "no one is individually forced to see the commodity in this way" (Ehrbar 2010: 463). Moreover, the exteriority that is ultimately presupposed in Rubin's "dualistic" approach leads to relating the various aspects of fetishism in crudely causal terms; that is, by presenting "false consciousness" as an effect brought about by (and therefore subsequent to) the commodity form of the product of labor (Rubin 1928: 78).

In this context we can advance the central argument of this work. In a nutshell, we will argue that in the section on "The Fetishistic Character of the Commodity, and Its Secret" Marx develops the underlying unity between fetishism as a form of consciousness and the determination of the product of labor as a commodity. This point of view, certainly, contrasts sharply with the conceptual separation of "commodity fetishism" into two different processes, linked to each other only externally. But, in addition to the affirmation of this unity, we propose to make explicit how the forms of consciousness and the social objectivity proper to the commodity relationship are articulated. To do so, we recover some relatively recent and

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commonplaces that characterize the thinking of the participants in production..." (Rubin, 1974: 75–6).

highly innovative developments in the critique of political economy (e.g., Postone 1993; Iñigo 2003; Heinrich 2004). Among them, Iñigo's approach to consciousness as a form of organization of social labor and, therefore, as the bearer of the social relations of production (2007: 43–54) is particularly relevant. We shall try to show that, in this very sense, "commodity fetishism" is the form of consciousness which organizes social labour in commodity society, and that for this very reason fetishism is the concrete mediation of the transformation of the product of labour into a commodity. To put it once and for all in very simple terms (for the sake of clarity at this point in the discussion), the point we want to make in this article is that the commodity as such could not exist without the mediation of this particular form of consciousness. Fetishism, then, is not a false consciousness about an already constituted social objectivity, but the very form of establishing that objectivity. Thus, it is hoped to offer a novel reading on the role of consciousness in the "real" aspect of "fetishism" (in addition to its obvious role in the "illusory" aspect), that is, on how consciousness intervenes in the determination of the product of labor as a commodity. We believe that this question, although implicit in some recent authors, especially those identified with the "analysis of the value form", [5]has not received the detailed treatment it deserves.

THE CONTENT OF THE TERMS "FETISHISM" AND "FETISHISTIC CHARACTER OF THE COMMODITY"

As a first step in our analysis we will try to identify the precise meaning that the expressions "fetishism" and "fetishistic character" have for Marx. To this end, it is important to bear in mind that a characteristic of the method of exposition in Capital consists of introducing technical terms only after having developed the determinations of their content. In the words of Marx himself, referring to his discovery of value as a specific attribute of the commodity, his method does not consist in starting from the "concept of value", but in analysing the commodity as "the simplest social form in which the product of labour takes shape in today's society", and only then (once the analysis is completed) to distinguish terminologically between "value", "exchange-value" and "use-value" (Marx 1879-1880: 48–49). This expository procedure is repeated numerous times in Capital, as for example in the distinctions between "constant capital" and "variable" (1873a: 252) or between "absolute surplus value" and "relative" (Marx 1873b: 383). As we will see immediately, the same happens in the section on fetishism, so that a first key to understanding the terms "fetishistic character" and "fetishism" is found in the four paragraphs that precede their first use.

The section begins with an exposition which, instead of directly continuing the preceding development, seems to start the study of the

[5] It is probably Reichelt who most clearly characterized courage as the result of an "action that takes place in the mind, but of which we are not aware" (2001: 16). See also Sohn Rethel on value as "real abstraction" (1979: 27-29).

commodity anew from an immediate observation, namely, that the commodity appears "at first sight" as a simple object.[6] However, the reader is immediately referred to the research done in the earlier sections of the chapter, which showed that behind this appearance, the commodity is a "very complicated thing." In fact, the simplicity of the commodity corresponds to its character as a use-value; As such, there is "nothing mysterious about it", it is an "ordinary, sensible thing". But, when considered as a commodity, on the other hand, use-value has a property that specifically distinguishes it. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in this paragraph, it is clear that this property is value, since this is the only attribute that differentiates the commodity from simple use-value. By the way, the ability of the commodity to change its use value (through exchange) without any material operation on it is a very unnatural attribute (Iñigo 2007: 24). In this sense, the commodity is a "sensory supersensible thing", as Marx had already pointed out earlier when referring to its "objectivity" as value, to which "one does not know where to grasp it" (Marx 1873a: 58). It is also in reference to this objectivity "of a purely social nature" (Ibid.) that the at first glance obscure passage about what happens to a wooden table "as soon as it enters the scene as a commodity" (Marx 1873a: 87) is understood. As Ehrbar (2010: 437) points out, the table "turns upside down" in the sense that, when related to other commodities (especially in their form of equivalent), its natural attributes become a form of manifestation of opposing social contents. Thus, use-value becomes the expression of value, concrete labour of the abstract, and private labour of the social (Marx 1873a: 68–72). These inverted forms of manifestation (which Marx alludes to as "capricious chimeras"), moreover, spring from the commodity itself (from its "wooden head", in the case of the table) in its relationship with the others.[7] In short, this first paragraph does nothing more than emphasize, although certainly in highly metaphorical language, the conclusions of the preceding investigation on the form of value.

For this very reason the exposition can only continue in this way. In the second paragraph of the section, Marx rightly points out that "the mystical character of the commodity" cannot have to do with the content of value in any of its three aspects. That is, neither with the qualitative equality between the various concrete labours as abstract labours, nor with the duration of labour as a common substance, nor with the inherently social determination of labour itself. Clearly, these determinations of labour

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[6] See Starosta (in press), for a discussion of the methodological significance of this starting point.

[7] The complete passage is as follows: "It is crystal clear that man, by his activity, alters the forms of natural matter in such a way that they are useful to him. The shape of the wood is modified, for example, when it is made into a table. Nevertheless, the table is still wood, an ordinary, sensitive thing. But as soon as it enters the scene as a commodity, it is transmuted into something sensorially supersensible. Not only does it stand stiff resting its legs on the ground, but it stands upside down in front of all other commodities and from its wooden head spring chimeras much more capricious than if, by free determination, it threw itself into dancing" (Marx 1873a: 87).

are natural properties of labour, common to any form of society, and therefore cannot be the explanation of the "supersensible" particularities of the commodity form. The explanation must be sought, instead, in the form adopted by this content:

> "Where, then, does the enigmatic character arise which distinguishes the product of labour as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Obviously, in that same way. The equality of human labor takes the material form of the equal objectivity of value of the products of labor; the measure of the expenditure of human labor power by its duration takes the form of the magnitude of the value that the products of labor reach; finally, the relations between the producers, in which the social determinations of their labour are made effective, take the form of a social relation between the products of labour." (Marx 1873a: 88)".

In this paragraph (the third), it is shown how the three determinations of the content of value appear transmuted as characteristics of the product of labor. In the first place, the commonality as an expenditure of the human body (abstract labour) of the various concrete labours appears in products as the common property of being values, despite their qualitative divergence as use-values. Second, the amount of abstract labor expended in production appears as the quantity of value of the product. Thirdly, the social determination of labour appears as a relation of exchange between products. We may note, moreover, that Marx refers to these attributes of the product as forms [Formen] which receive [erhälten] the properties of the labour which produced it. This allows us to reflect on the specific topic of the section on fetishism. In sections 1 and 2 of the first chapter of Capital, the research focuses on labor as the content of value. Then, in section 3, the focus shifts to the shape of the value. In section 4, on the other hand, the issue is neither the content nor the form of value, but the concrete way in which that content exists in this form. To borrow an expression of Marx from elsewhere, the question that is sought to be resolved in the section that concerns us is "how, why, through what" (1873a: 112) the labor expended in producing use-value ends up taking the form of an attribute proper to it, value.

The fourth paragraph of the section is structured around this implicit question. In effect, there is again considered the form of representation of labour in the commodity (i.e., as value), which in the previous development (especially in the section on the "form of value") had been expounded in the "language of commodities" (Marx 1873a: 64). In this new review of the issue, the gaze is directed, instead, to the relationship of the human being with his product. That is, it is only at this moment that the consciousness of individuals explicitly enters the scene, as is evident in the use of the expression "reflect before men":

> "The mystery of the commodity form consists simply in the fact that it reflects to men the social character of their own labour as objective characteristics inherent in the products of labour, as natural social properties of these things, and therefore also in the fact that it also reflects the social relation between the producers and the labour as a whole. as a social relationship between objects, existing outside the producers". (Marx 1873a: 88).

The sentence immediately following is crucial because it makes explicit that, in analyzing the relationship of the human being with his product and the way in which it is represented to him in his consciousness, what we are looking at is precisely the mediation through which the product of labor assumes the form of a commodity:

> "It is by means of this quid pro quo that the products of labor become commodities, into sensory supersensible or social things." (Marx 1873a: 88).

Here, the expression "quid pro quo" refers, as is clear from the wording, to the "substitution" enunciated in the preceding sentence: that is, it alludes to the fact that the social character of the product (i.e., its value) takes the place of the social character of the labor that produced it. Taken together, the reading of these two sentences leaves no doubt that the "substitution" in question occurs in the consciousness of individuals when confronted with the product of their labor. Marx seems to realize the strangeness that this conclusion can produce in the reader, accustomed at this point to an exposition that had been rigorously following the movement of the commodity, in which the consciousness of human beings seemed to play absolutely no role (Starosta in press). Probably to clarify the question he presents two analogies of this form of consciousness, the meaning of which, however, is not directly evident. Let's look at the first one:

> "Similarly, the luminous impression of a thing on the optic nerve does not appear as a subjective excitation of that nerve, but as an objective form of a thing situated outside the eye." (Marx 1873a: 88).

What Marx seems to want to emphasize with this comparison is the "substitution" proper to the commodity form. In particular, the "luminous impression" is not presented as what it is, an excitation that occurs inside the human being, but as something that it is not (directly at least), that is, as an external object. The same happens with the commodity: the social character of labor (an attribute proper to the human being as a productive subject) is presented as something else, as a characteristic of an object external to the human being himself. But the analogy does not allow us to fully grasp the externalization that also characterizes the commodity form,

insofar as, in the final analysis, the light that provokes the visual representation comes from an object external to the human being himself:

> "But in the act of seeing light is effectively projected from one thing, the external object, in another, the eye. It is a physical relationship between physical things. On the other hand, the commodity form and the relation of value between the products of labour in which this form is represented have absolutely nothing to do with their physical nature, nor with the relations proper to things which are derived from that nature. What here takes, for men, the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things, is only the determinate social relation existing between them." (Marx 1873a: 88).

Marx is seeking, so to speak, an analogy that allows us to highlight the "interior" character of the content that is externalized, that is, its purely social determination[8]. He finds it in religion:

> "Hence, to find a pertinent analogy, we must seek refuge in the foggy regions of the religious world. In this the products of the human mind appear to be autonomous figures, endowed with a life of their own, in relation to each other and to men. The same thing happens in the world of commodities with the products of the human hand." (Marx 1873a: 89).

Indeed, the contrast with the previous analogy is clear. Religious figures are presented as autonomous, external forms, capable of relating to each other and to human beings, just like commodities. But their real content, like that of commodities and unlike the physical objects of the previous analogy, is endogenous to the human being: both religious figures and commodities are products of human practice. In one case, by the way, they are products "of the mind", while in the other "of the hand", but this difference does not seem to be relevant in this context. Indeed, it is remarkable that, in order to illustrate the nature of the quid pro quo which mediates the conversion of the product into a commodity, Marx resorts to two analogies which clearly refer to processes occurring in the human brain. This seems to confirm that this quid pro quo is, in essence, an act of conscience.

Having completed the consideration of these two analogies, Marx introduces the term "fetishism" for the first time:

> "This I call the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is inseparable from commodity production." (Marx 1873a: 89).

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[8] Moreover, here too there is an implicit theme that we will deal with later, that is, the recognition of the immanent character of the social in the individual ("interior"); in fact, the social is opposed to both the "physical" and the "external".

In this sentence Marx is explicitly giving a name to something developed previously. Since it is introduced as a closing to the fourth paragraph, the term "fetishism" must refer to the axis that structures it; which, as we have seen, is the quid pro quo or "substitution" of the social character of labor for the social character of the product. In this sense, "fetishism" is the answer to the question – which organizes this paragraph – regarding how this substitution that constitutes the commodity is carried out. *That is, fetishism is the concrete way through which the product becomes a commodity*. Now, this *quid pro quo*, as we have also seen, is the way in which the producer represents his product and, therefore, "fetishism" is, fundamentally, an attribute of the producer of commodities and, more specifically, of his consciousness.

When Marx introduces the term "fetishistic character" in the immediately following sentence (p. 89), he does so in a wording that at first glance seems to indicate that there is no difference between this term and the term "fetishism" used earlier. Indeed, it seems incorrect to maintain that actual objectification and the "substitution" that occurs in consciousness are distinct processes. This interpretation (to which we have already referred by pointing out its origin in Rubin's work) implicitly assumes that the establishment of the social relationship between human beings is independent of (and abstractly prior to) the determination of the form of consciousness. It is for this reason that it is usually proposed that mystification is an effect caused by the objectification of the social relationship. Consider, for example, this passage from Rubin:

> "But the specific nature of the commodity-capitalist economy lies in the fact that the relations of production between people are not established only for things, but also through things. This is precisely what gives the relations of production between people a 'materialized', 'reified' form and gives rise to the fetishism of the commodity, the confusion between the technical-material aspect and the economic-social aspect of the production process, a confusion that was eliminated by Marx's new sociological method." (Rubin 1928: 78).

It is quite clear that, for Rubin, the reification of the social relationship is the cause of the "confusion" of consciousness; and consequently that the first precedes the second. This even leads them to argue that Marx would have eliminated this "confusion", in fact minimizing the role of fetishism as a form of general social consciousness in commodity society.

In contrast, from my point of view the relationship between "confusion" and "objectification" is much simpler: in essence, they are two aspects of the same phenomenon or process. When Marx uses the expression "fetishistic character of the commodity" he is referring to an attribute that the commodity possesses, but at the same time he is pointing out that it possesses it as a result of human beings behaving towards it in a

particular way. This form of behavior, in turn, is determined by a particular form of consciousness (since, obviously, any human behavior is at least immediately governed by its consciousness). In other words, for Marx the commodity is a fetish (i.e. it has a "fetishistic character") because human beings are, under certain circumstances that we will discuss later, fetishists (i.e. their consciousness is dominated by "fetishism"). As obvious as this point may seem, it presupposes a view opposed to Rubin's influential interpretation of "commodity fetishism." Indeed, while the latter is based on the separation between practice and consciousness (presenting the latter as a simple effect or reflection of the former), our reading emphasizes instead the unity between both aspects of human life and, more specifically, the necessary role of consciousness as a mediator of the transformation of the product of labor into a commodity[9]. This does not mean, however, that the form of consciousness does not itself have its own material determinations. In fact, this is the point that Marx immediately addresses.

LABOR AS THE CONTENT OF SOCIAL RELATIONS AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN THE COMMODITY

In fact, Marx then goes on to point out the reason that explains the quid pro quo or "substitution" that gives the commodity form to the product of labor, affirming that the "fetishistic character of the world of commodities originates, as the preceding analysis has shown, in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces commodities" (p. 89).

Now, what exactly are the aspects of this "preceding analysis" that support this statement? To answer this, we must return for a moment to the third paragraph of the section, already quoted in full above. It shows how the three aspects of the content of value determinations take the form of attributes of commodities. Referring to the third aspect, the social character of labor, Marx writes: "the relations between producers, in which the social determinations of their labor are made effective, take the form..." (p. 88). This formulation shows the close relationship that exists, for Marx, between the social relations of individuals and their practical activity, that is, their work. The expression "become effective" also seems to indicate a clear order of determination, according to which the social character of the

[9] This critique seems to contradict Rubin's assertion that the "theory of fetishism" should be understood as a "propaedeutic to political economy" (Rubin 1928: 54), and consequently, as the "dialectical foundation" of the theory of value (p. 113). However, Rubin himself clarifies that the "central idea of the theory of fetishism" has nothing to do with the forms of consciousness but with the fact that in "commodity-capitalist society [the] relations of production between people necessarily acquire a material form" (p. 114). But this interpretation of the role of the "theory of fetishism" in the general development of Capital is patently erroneous, insofar as the "reification" of social relations (i.e., the character of the commodity as an objectified form of the general social relation) had been discovered by Marx at an earlier point in the dialectical development; more precisely, in the third section of the first chapter (Starosta in press; see also Backhaus 1969: 102). In other words, unless one thinks that the section on fetishism is a mere redundancy, its content has to go beyond pointing to the "objectification" of social relations as such.

individual's work is the content of (and therefore determines a) his social relationship with the rest of the members of society.

This determination of social relations by work appears again in the first sentence of the following paragraph, the fourth of the section (also cited above). At first glance, this paragraph simply summarizes what was said in the previous one; However, a careful reading reveals that in this new "review" the transformation of the product of labor into a commodity is described in two moments. First, the "social character of labor" is reflected as "objective characteristics inherent in products" (p. 88). Second, "the social relation that mediates between producers and social labour" is reflected as "social relation between objects" (p. 88). Consequently, the first thing that becomes clear is that in the commodity there are two contents represented, or at any rate a double content: on the one hand, the social character of the labour which produces it is expressed, and on the other hand, the social relation of the one who performs the work is expressed. But, fundamentally, an order is explicitly established in the representation of these two contents: the main role is played by the work carried out. That is to say, in the first place, labour is represented as value, and consequently ("therefore" [daher," says Marx), the social relation of the one who performs it is represented as a relation between products. As we can see, the sentence we are discussing shows again that, for Marx, the content of the social relations between producers is given by the social character of the individual work that they perform, that is, by the fact that individual jobs are part of the whole of society's work, or "global work." From the analysis of the commodity form, therefore, it follows that the reason for any historical specificity that the relation between producers may have is to be sought in the form – also historically specific or "peculiar" – that their individual labour has as part of the overall social labour.

The structuring of the next paragraph, the sixth, follows the order of this determination: first it shows how the work that produces commodities is carried out, and only then does it analyze the form that the social relations between the producers take as a result. Let's first see what is said about work:

> "If objects for use become commodities, this is solely because they are the products of private labour performed independently of each other. The complex of these private jobs is what constitutes global social work." (Marx 1873a: 89).

Marx had already clarified that in every social epoch individual labors are parts of a global social work; Now he adds that in the society of commodity producers, these jobs are carried out privately and independently. This form of labor is the basic historical specificity of commodity society, and it is what distinguishes it from other societies based on the social division of labor. These points, in fact, had already been presented previously in previous sections of the first chapter of Capital

(Starosta in press). Consequently, the exposition advances without delay, proposing the effects of this way of doing work on the social relationship:

> "Since producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labor, the specifically social attributes of these private labors manifest themselves only in the framework of this exchange. (...) [To the producers], therefore, the social relations between their private labors are revealed for what they are, that is, not as directly social relations between the persons themselves, in their labors, but on the contrary as relations proper to things between persons and social relations between things." (Marx 1873a: 89).

We can find in this passage an implicit contrast between work done privately and (hypothetical?) work done in a directly social way. In the latter case, social relations would be established immediately, at the very moment when individuals worked ("in their jobs"). In contrast, in commodity society the social character of labour cannot be expressed as such at the very moment of work, because there is no direct social contact between the producers at the moment of production (this is precisely what private labour consists of).

In short, a first clear conclusion is that, for Marx, *the social relations of the individuals who make up society are expressions of the social character of their work*. In other words, the sociability of human beings is already present in the capacity of each one of them to work, to carry out a part of social work. When human beings work, they do nothing more than express this sociability, make it effective, so that it is translated, so to speak, into social relations. But this has as a corollary that the particular forms that social relations have in each historical moment depend, in turn, on the particular form that work has. In commodity society, the absence of direct social relations at the time of the performance of the work determines that the social character of these is expressed only as the capacity of their product to be exchanged for another. This, however, is the cause that explains the form of the commodity, i.e. why the social character of labor takes the form of the value of its product, a determination that Marx already revealed analytically in the second section of the first chapter[10] and that he fully develops in the third (Iñigo 2007: 241). In other words, it is again a point that, although stated in a different way, is nothing more than a repetition of previous developments. It can therefore only be the beginning of the resolution of the question of the origin of fetishism, that is, of the form it has in the consciousness of commodity producers: the answer cannot be complete. We know that private labor is the content of the commodity form and, therefore, its cause. We also know that that content takes this form through the mediation of a quid pro quo. But this mediation was merely enunciated by Marx. In the seventh paragraph of the section, Marx advances in the unfolding of the complete determinations (i.e.,

[10] "Only the products of autonomous, mutually independent private labor confront each other like commodities" (Marx 1873a: 52)

including consciousness as mediation) of the commodity as a form of the general social relation between private and independent producers.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND MERCHANDISE

To this end, Marx recalls the social determinations of labour (i.e., its social necessity as concrete labour and its equality with other concrete labour as abstract labour), and then shows how the producer represents them to himself when labour is private:

> "The brains of private producers reflect this double social character of their private labors only in the forms which manifest themselves in practical movement, in the exchange of products: the socially useful character of their private labors, then, reflects it only in the form that the product of labor must be useful, and precisely to be so for others; the social character of equality between the various labors, only in the form of the character of value that is common to those materially different things, the products of labor." (Marx 1873a: 90).

The consciousness of the commodity producer cannot directly recognize the social character of his own labor because the labor is done privately. That is, instead of directly recognizing the usefulness that their work has for society, what they do is seek the usefulness of their product for others; and, instead of directly recognizing his own labor, as qualitatively equal to any other, as part of social labor, what he does is seek the equalization of his product with all other products in exchange. In this passage we see again, now more clearly, that the quid pro quo which mediates the determination of the product of labour as a commodity is fundamentally an act of consciousness. In fact, in this paragraph Marx explicitly states that the "reflection" [spiegeln] to which he had already alluded is produced in the "brains of private producers".

At the beginning of the following paragraph (the eighth), Marx goes on to look at this aspect of the consciousness of the commodity producer, now immediately in the framework of the establishment of exchange:

> "Consequently, the fact that men relate the products of their labor to each other as values is not due to the fact that such things count for them as mere material envelopes of homogeneously human labor. Conversely. By equating their heterogeneous products with each other in exchange as values, they reciprocally equate their various labors as human labor. They don't know it, but they do it [footnote: That is why, when Galiani says: value is a relationship between persons (...) I should have added: a relationship hidden under a wrapping of a thing (...)". (Marx 1873a: 90).

As is well known, the main conclusion of the analysis of the commodity with which Capital begins is that the relation between commodities in exchange is only possible because they are the products of socially necessary abstract labour performed privately[11]. That is, commodities are exchanged because they are products of private labor that, insofar as they are part of social labor, are qualitatively equal despite their concrete diversity. But, precisely because of the determination of consciousness developed by Marx in the previous (seventh) paragraph, commodity producers do not exchange their products for this reason. That is, they do not change their products as a result of recognizing the essential equality between their individual labors; if they did, they would be in a form of directly social production. On the other hand, since they carry out their work privately and independently, what they do is to relate their products as values, and only through this mediation do they relate their own works to each other and, in this sense, to equate them. This is what the famous phrase "they don't know, but they do" refers to: what commodity producers do without knowing is to validate their individual labour expenditure as a part of the overall social labour expenditure, that is, to organise it as part of the whole of society's labour.

At this point, it is appropriate, in order to delve into this question, to refer to the wording of this same paragraph in the first edition of Capital, since it formulates the role of conscience more explicitly. Let us look at the text of this edition that corresponds to the passage quoted on the previous page:

> "If men relate their products to each other as values, in so far as these things count as mere material envelopes of homogeneously human labour, this at the same time implies, conversely, that their various labours only in a material envelope count as homogeneous human labour. They relate their various labors to each other as human labor, inasmuch as they relate their products to each other as values. The personal relationship is hidden by the material form. Courage, therefore, does not have written on its forehead what it is. In order to relate their products to each other as commodities, men are forced to equate their various labors with abstractly human labor. They do not know it, but, by reducing the material thing to the abstraction of value, they do it. It is a spontaneous and natural, and therefore unconscious and instinctive, operation of his brain." (Marx 1867: 1010).

Most of the cited paragraph, although with a different wording with respect to the second edition, states essentially the same as what we have

[11] Although, to tell the truth, many commentators consider that the content of value is simply abstract labor, ignoring Marx's indications that the historical specificity of commodity-producing labor passes only through its private character (Starosta 2008: 307-308).

just developed. But in the last two sentences it is made explicit, first, that we are dealing with a mental act (an "operation of the brain") and then some of its characteristics are developed. In the act of exchange, Marx says, there is an abstraction from the "material thing" (use-value) to value. Of course, this situation is what is discussed in the first section of the chapter: the exchange of commodities shows that in the body of two different use-values there must be "a something that is equal" that allows for equalization (Marx 1873a: 45–6). The abstraction of the material qualities of the values of use in exchange is therefore not a novelty that is presented in this part of the work. From the first pages we already knew that this "something in common" between the different use-values, which qualitatively equalizes them and therefore makes the exchange relation possible, is value. But now Marx shows the role that consciousness plays in this abstraction, since it is affirmed that this common something, value, is the result of an operation of the brain of the producers. Value, which was discovered by Marx at the beginning of the first chapter when he analytically penetrated into the commodity and, therefore, was discovered as an immanent attribute of the commodity[12], now also appears as the result of an act of consciousness of its producer. Value, then, is a form of consciousness which, at the same time, is an objective form of the product of labor. Let's take a closer look at this striking conclusion.

Marx describes the operation of the brain in question as "spontaneous and natural, and therefore unconscious and instinctive", which is in accordance with the use, in the previous passages, of the term "reflect" (which alludes, precisely, to a somewhat passive act of consciousness). If the private producer behaves towards his product as a commodity or, as stated at the beginning of this paragraph, if he relates his product to another as a value, it is because this behavior is guided by a form of involuntary consciousness which consists in representing the social determinations of labor itself as attributes of the product.

Next, also in a passage from the first edition, Marx presents the determination of this form of consciousness:

> It necessarily springs from the particular mode of their material production and from the conditions in which this production places them. First, their relationship exists in practice. But secondly, because they are men, their relationship exists as a relationship for them. The way it exists for them, or how it is reflected in their brain, stems from the nature of the relationship itself." (Marx 1867: 1010).

Now, even though the transformation of the commodity into a commodity involves, as a necessary mediation, a specific form of consciousness (fetishism), the ultimate determination of the commodity as a form of social relation springs from the private form of labor. In fact, as we have developed in the last pages, in paragraphs 6 to 8 of the section on

[12] See, also, Marx's later reflections in this same sense (1867: 128 and 138).

fetishism, Marx systematically exposes the determination of the commodity relation, starting from the historically specific way in which the labor process is carried out, that is, of private labor, and developing how this material content determines the forms that social relations between producers take and, therefore, the role of consciousness in them.

Perhaps we can give more precision to this question about the order of determination in the unity of social being (in other words, about the "internal connection" between work, social relations, and consciousness that make up the unity of human practice) by reflecting on Marx's distinction, in the passage quoted above, between "relation in practice" and "relation to them." The relation in practice (between the producers of commodities) is the relation that exists at the moment of material production, since it is at this moment that the social determinations of labour are unfolding. But the fact that work is carried out privately prevents the immediate, direct recognition of this social character and, therefore, individuals must represent this social character (that social relationship in practice) as an attribute that has its product, manifested only in exchange. This last manifestation is the relationship as it exists for them.

The social relationship, in fact, is present at all times. At the moment of production there is undoubtedly a social relationship between the producers, insofar as each one is producing a part of what society is then going to consume. At that precise moment, when private producers are working (and therefore not yet exchanging) society is already organized in a certain way. But this organization is not direct, since it is not immediately conscious, and therefore cannot be recognized as such by the producers. Real social contact only happens later, in exchange. There, the social relation exists for them as a relation between commodities, as a result of the fact that their consciousness cannot immediately recognize the social character of the individual labour which it itself governs (since all labour is itself a conscious action). The way in which the social relation manifests itself to the producers—as a relation between things which have the attribute of changeability, i.e., which have value—flows from their actual relation in practice. This is so because the manifest relation, the exchange relation between products (i.e., their form of value) simply reflects, but does not determine, the social character that labor itself possessed at the time of production. Of course, because of the private nature of labor, the concrete useful form that the producer decides to give to his activity could be socially useless; for example, if he decided to produce an object that does not satisfy any solvent social need. In such a case, their labour would be of no social utility at the time of its realisation and, consequently, their product would be worthless. In other words, the absence of "relation in practice" in this case (insofar as the expenditure of the body was wasted by being effected in a socially useless manner) would naturally be reflected in an absence of

"relation to them", that is, in a product without any capacity to be exchanged for another[13].

Marx does not advance further in the relationship between labor and consciousness in the first chapter of Capital, probably because following this path would take him too far away from the strict analysis of the commodity. Consequently, it is only in the fifth chapter that the question of the role of consciousness in the work process as such is addressed, that is, as a generic process of exchange between human beings and nature; and even there it is treated unilaterally as an abstractly individual process, without paying attention to its immanent social determinations. However, it should be noted that, in this passage, Marx emphasizes that conscious regulation is the key element that distinguishes human work from any other process of animal metabolism. In this sense, consciousness is recognized, in its generic determination, as the way of organizing the labor process and, therefore, as an inseparable component of labor itself. From my point of view, this approach to the materiality of consciousness as a form of organization of the labor process is the key to Marx's materialist method. In fact, from this perspective, consciousness—far from being conceived as an autonomous faculty or abstractly opposed to practical activity—shows itself in its real determination as a productive capacity of the human being[14].

Now, as we have seen, the process of individual labor is based on its immanently social powers. In fact, each individual labour-process depends on the product of other individual labour-processes, and in the same way each labourer produces not only or principally for himself, but for others. This means that, in addition to governing the immediately individual labor process—that is, the organization of the expenditure of energy that is applied to nature in order to obtain a use-value *conscience must also regulate the social character of work*. In other words, if work is at the same time an individual process that at the same time expresses a social character, such a double character must be reflected in consciousness as its form of organization.

The key point of this for our subject is that, in the society of commodity producers, this double character of consciousness as a regulator of the individual and social character of labor is split. On the one hand, the producer is fully conscious of the individual powers of his labor, that is, he consciously controls the way in which he spends his energy according to his predetermined goal. But it has no control *direct, immediately conscious*, of its social character (Iñigo 2003: 10). However, it is nevertheless consciousness itself that governs the social organization of individual labors. But it does so in the contradictory form of commodity fetishism, this

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[13] In concrete terms, this means that (in contrast to Rubin's "circulationist" versions of the theory of value) value is generated solely and completely in production, whereas in circulation or exchange this value is only confirmed or realized (Kicillof and Starosta 2007).

[14] This is precisely what Marx and Engels emphasize in The German Ideology: "Consciousness can never be anything other than conscious being, and the being of men is their real life process" (1972: 26).

"spontaneous and natural, and therefore unconscious and instinctive" form of consciousness. The material power of consciousness as a form of organization of social labor is alienated in the commodity. *so that this aspect of consciousness exists in the form of value objectivity*. Thus, the value of the commodity is the value of the commodity. *Representation* unconscious, on the part of the producers, of the social attributes of labor as a property of their product. Consciousness in fact governs the social organization of individual labor in commodity society, but it does so in an inverted form, that is, in a concrete form that presents itself as the opposite of what it is. From my point of view, it is precisely this that Marx emphasizes in the following passage (we return here to the editorial of the second edition):

> "Courage, therefore, does not have written on its forehead what it is. On the contrary, it transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyph. Later on, men try to decipher the meaning of the hieroglyph, to unravel the mystery of their own social product, since the determination of objects for use as values is their social product in the same way as language." (Marx 1873a: 90–1).

With this pointing out the value-form of the product of labour as an external and objectified form of the consciousness of the commodity producers, the dialectical development of the simplest forms of the commodity as a form of social relation reaches a culminating moment. Development has reached the point where the consciousness of the commodity producer can only confront the value-form of the product of labour as an attribute entirely alien to itself, and therefore uncontrollable, although value, as we have seen, is a form of such consciousness. In Marx's words, the "social movement" of value magnitudes "possesses for them [the producers] the form of a movement of things under whose control they are, instead of controlling them" (p. 91).

From this point on (from the tenth paragraph up to and including the end of the chapter), Marx's argument abandons the strict development of the value form, giving rise to a series of observations on the outward expression of commodity fetishism, i.e., on the way in which individual consciousness confronts the already socially constituted objectivity of value and, therefore, it is already opaque with respect to its true content. It is only in this place that the role of false or illusory consciousness appears, as a corollary of commodity fetishism. In these pages Marx comments on how political economy is incapable of overcoming fetishism and therefore tends to present as natural that which is purely social, namely, the objectivity of the value of commodities. However, this more concrete aspect of commodity fetishism is, strictly speaking, external to the dialectical development of the form of value and therefore does not constitute the axis of Marx's study of the consciousness of the commodity producer[15]. In fact, this development is

[15] Marx also comments in the last pages of the section on the forms of consciousness corresponding to other modes of production, which is also alien to the strict development

taken up only in the second chapter, exactly from the point reached in the ninth paragraph, that is, starting from the external relation between the individual consciousness of the commodity producer and the form of value of his product (Starosta in press). For this reason, our textual discussion of the section on fetishism ends here.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the main conclusion of this paper is that the so-called "commodity fetishism" should not be understood as a simple false consciousness (i.e. as an erroneous conception of the commodity), but neither as a simple indication of the "reified" character of the social relationship in the society of commodity producers. Instead, we argue that the commodity itself is a form of consciousness through which commodity producers organize their social process of production and consumption. It is, by the way, a very special form of consciousness. On the one hand, it is a consciousness that is externalized, assuming the alienated form of the objectivity of the value of the product of labor. On the other hand, this externalized and objectified consciousness coexists with the immediate and practical consciousness of the commodity producer, in a true splitting. In this way, the commodity producer immediately controls, in a directly conscious way, the character of the product. *individual* of their work. But it does not control its social character in the same way. Instead, it does so only in a "spontaneous and natural, and therefore unconscious and instinctive" way, projecting this social character as the value of the product. In this way, he loses control over his own social powers, which confront him as powers that dominate him.

In conclusion, let us highlight the implications of this re-reading of the content of commodity fetishism with respect to the materialism that guides Marx's scientific project (Marx 1857: 4–6). The materialist method, from my point of view, does not consist simply in affirming that the development of social being determines, as an external cause or conditioning, the transformations of consciousness. As we have tried to show in this article (with the limited scope given by its specific topic), consciousness is itself a productive force that the human being deploys at the moment when he works socially. This approach involves highlighting the unity between consciousness and social being that arises from recognizing the materiality of consciousness as a form of organization immanent in the work process[16]. Moreover, and more concretely, we have argued that the specific historical form of development of the human social being in commodity society is determined by the private character of labor. As a private producer who cannot recognize the social determinations of his labor, the individual must unconsciously project his own social being onto the product of his labor. This behavior, materially determined by the "peculiar social character of

of commodity knowledge.

[16] This point of view is exhaustively developed in Iñigo (2003) and Starosta (2016).

commodity-producing labor," converts the products of labor into commodities, i.e., into objects with the objective capacity to be exchanged. In this precise sense, "fetishism" as a form of consciousness is not simply a corollary or an external consequence of an already constituted social objectivity, but rather the mediation or necessary concrete form of the determination of the commodity as a form of social relation. In other words, the objectivity of commodity value only exists in the form of (i.e., through) the fetishistic consciousness of commodity producers.